

Tähtikuvitelma: The Parable of Participating in the Night Sky 2.0

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PART I.

Once a upon a time,
Standing out in open air,
Where the city should respect it's oxygen room,
There was an Other who looked up.
And asked One nearby:
"What would you like to see in the night sky?"
One replied,
"Individual stars of One's own design, which can be linked together as a constellation,
To shine alongside another One's constellation!"
"What a nice idea!", the Other thought, smiling.
So the Other organised a structure for One to do this,
And One made One's own design.
The Other organised some more, making it easy for more to do so,
And word spread, so that along came more than just One.
Indeed, every One who did made their own imaginary star constellations,
And it was possible to see many more different designs than just One's own.
A hopeful view of what each One can see when One looks up,
The organising Other also made a constellation in the same way as every One else,
And every One who wished to do the Other's organising work also did so.
To different degrees all ideally contributed to designing the night sky.
Indeed these arrangements of stars blurred the difference between One and an Other,
and there were eventually many constellations which stretched far and wide across the skies.
But of course,
This whole activity attracted the attention of a different type of organising Other.
"What a nice idea 2.0!"
Who expressed an interest in the value of the collective design of every One's constellations.
When this happened,

Every One involved in making imaginary star constellations was concerned
"What do they want with this view of the night sky?"
They asked themselves if every One's vision together should actually follow an Other's organising design,
Or a design of the collective One's own.
They remembered that this knowledge had been passed down
From previous generations of astrologic designers
Who knew that each One contributes hopefully,
And sometimes critically,
To the formation of what every One believes to be
A Grand Galaxy,
In the process expanding One's own relational space,
Mutually increasing One's brightness among Others.
But at the same time,
One was aware with a clear view
That One can also become part of the organising Other's own design.
A galaxy that has an ever-increasing value and sparkle
for the Other who first posed the question.

PART II.

Tähtikuvitelma is an invented Finnish word that means approximately, 'imaginary star constellations'. It was the name given to a participatory workshop I devised and coordinated in collaboration with Simo Häänpää during November-December 2005, involving a mix of 45 targeted young and ad-hoc people in Helsinki. To clarify, when I write 'devised', I mean that as a director or initiator of the activity, I have chosen and determined the framing devices as well as the method of interaction. Prior to the workshop, participants are not able to influence the decisions about how the workshop will be run. Like an engaged 'benevolent dictator', I have a positively-invested interest in how things unfold out/onwards from the social frameworks I have set up in advance, and in the engagements they allow or contain. This working-draft text relates to the process of organizing and production. It explores the idealism and micro-management of participation, and the likely un/sustainability of personal energy and interaction.

My aim in re-contextualising the 'Tähtikuvitelma' workshop experience within the PixelACHE 2007 'Architectures for Participation' seminar, is to relate it to the critical discourse surrounding social media-sharing online platforms. I do so with a suspicion that other public or socially-engaged arts projects, which may appear very material and embodied, are also similarly implicated in the debates around alternative, peer-to-peer distributed productions as promoted, for example, by the P2P Foundation [1]. The 'call for participation' - in recent times a common meme within socially engaged art and media projects - invites

participants to act as both creators and consumers of the process, creating valuable cultural / institutional / social capital. Caution should be applied in the ethics of this activity, as Kleiner and Wyrick remind us in the article 'Info-Enclosure 2.0', that "[p]rivate appropriation of community-created value is a betrayal of the promise of sharing technology and free cooperation" [2]. Meanwhile, reinforcing this perspective, Michel Bauwens recently wrote about the importance of making a distinction between peer-production processes and 'crowdsourcing' - a buzzword of 2006 in business circles regarding the political/economical model of outsourcing labour to the public online multitude. Whereas peer-production is mostly defined by "voluntary engagement, a production process under the control of the participants [including] universal access property regimes: Most corporate-driven 'crowdsourcing' will only apply the very first principle, i.e. voluntary engagement; they will aim to drive the production process, and the results will be proprietary. In terms of hierarchy of engagement, 'crowdsourcing' is more akin to swarming than to the collective intelligence of an intentional community" [3].

As a curator of workshops, and an artist-organiser concerned with forming intentional (but mostly temporary) communities, I am also someone who has devised and driven production processes, materially and electronically, in presence, but also remotely [4]. This is a moment to reflect upon which position I have been, am, and wish to be sitting in.. Have I been co-ordinating peer-production; or have I been crowdsourcing?

This is a tough question to answer. After all, here I am, currently developing my career on the accumulated social, cultural, institutional (if not really economical) capital of doing, writing and presenting about my/our/this work. As an initiator, I sometimes say that 'no-one-cares-as-much-as-you-do'. There is the niggling and unpleasant feeling that the exploitation of labour within the late Capitalist system - which is what troubles and motivates many, including myself, to follow another model - also happens within many projects that are open-source, non-commercial, and initiated with the best 'grassroots' or socially-engaged intentions.

From my experience, the voluntary artist-organiser, even if critical and constantly reflexive, has to stay alert to avoid slipping up on idealist ambitions, and even more so to maintain the stamina needed to fulfill early promises. Otherwise the processes One (or an 'Other') initiated may be criticized as (culturally/institutionally) exploitative of the voluntary participants. This is especially the case when financial and time resources are limited, and even more so when stretched during the follow-up/documentation process.

I advocate here not only for the need, when self-organising participatory cultural projects, to make transparent personal motivations and actions in advance, and in the resultant documentations, but to account for the 'nobody-cares-as-much-as-you-do' factor in the funding/production support. This unfolding of the

peer-production envelope, I believe, helps to dislodge some of the uneasy closeness these activities can have to the darker capitalist outcomes of 'Web 2.0' economics and 'crowdsourcing'.

So, with this introductory context and detailed entry considered, I now continue bringing this mindset to the following report of process: the 'Tähtikuvitelma' workshop.

PART III.

The 'Tähtikuvitelma' workshop I write about took place in 2005 at the cultural greenhouse project 'Happihuone' (meaning 'Oxygen-room' in Finnish), situated within the under-developed parkland of Töölönlahti in central urban Helsinki [5]. Originally established in 2000, 'Happihuone' consists of a gallery, café and surrounding garden allotment. It has also been, over the years, a venue and forum for alternative environmental, performing arts and ecological practices. Its future sustainability has always been uncertain, and is now under real/actual threat of dismantlement, due to a long and controversial plan for commercial development of this open park area [6]. Despite these troubles, a summer cultural programme has been curated and organised each year, with funded support from the city cultural office. The cultural greenhouse's name has proudly lived up to its reputation as a place of 'open breathing space' where one can do one's own things literally at a grassroots level - grow, exhibit, perform, and even take sauna - right in the middle of the city centre.

My relationship with 'Happihuone' began as a curious and appreciative patron of the summer programme, during which I learned of the uncertain status of the building, including problems of vandalism and broken windows during the long dark winter months. At the time I was a full-time, paid artist/researcher within the 'Urban Space Experience Design' research project coordinated by M-Cult, and hosted at Helsinki Institute of Information Technology. I very much appreciated the potential/parallel implications of 'going-grassroots-lowest-tech' with this theme at Happihuone [7]. Simo Haanpää, my friend and a full-time researcher at Centre for Urban and Regional Studies in Helsinki, shared my personal desire to help the visible and material sustainability of the site. So we proposed to initiate and make a workshop for Happihuone together, whose first purpose would be to protect the glass windows over the winter, and secondly, would raise awareness of the place to, and with, other audiences. For other personal reasons, I also interpreted our planned activity as a response to the gift-economy encouraged on site - a very material expression of 'orchestrated hope'.

The rectangular, grid-like window panels of the building - there were almost 70 in total on both on the east and west sides to be covered with wood - inspired the participatory concept of individual components 'filling' and protecting the glass integrity of the building. Further, an old illustration of the astrological star sign Taurus roused up our imaginations: We envisioned inviting people (youth groups, friends, passers-by, but also ourselves) to decorate the panels with our own imaginary star constellations, creating a collection of

individually-produced, visual-but-abstract statements. We would be posing the question, 'What would you like to see in the stars?'. Upon reflection, this prompt, which required a small personal-value contribution to a larger collective-value system, seems to appeal to what Trebor Scholtz, in speaking of the mass use of online 'Web 2.0' platforms such as Flickr, del.icio.us, YouTube, and MySpace, to name the most popular - has recently called "individualistic collectivism". This is elaborated as where/when "contributors are not exclusively in it for themselves but they are also not completely driven by the idea of the greater good" [8]. To expand what I mean by relating this last phrase, we were not actually asking our participants outright, 'How do we protect Happihuone from being damaged, dismantled..?', but were essentially asking, 'What interests you, what do you hope for?...Because this hope will contribute to our plan to protect 'Happihuone' from being damaged, dismantled and so on'.

The wooden veneer panels, then, may be considered as the proposed 'very material' media format to store the answer of this question, and may be attached to the preexisting architectural platform, arranged in a structured composition, consisting of collectivised content. To elaborate, each person would individually contribute conceptually, through image, and physically, through labour, to place their vision beside and within the same structure as everyone else. They are submitting to the process of actually making star constellations - that is, not interpreting stars in the sky, but arranging them in wood. The process hence promoted the abstraction of a personally-chosen subject/image to only a limited series of stars indicating its rough outline, then given a name and a motivation story, to indicate one's originating reference for the subject/image. Practically this meant 'reducing down' a photograph or drawing to dots and lines, with pencils and tracing paper. These constellation designs would then be transferred onto the wooden panels, and the 'stars' would be hand-drilled, according to different-sized holes. The panels would then be weatherproofed with tar, white 'constellation' lines would then be painted, connecting the 'stars' together, and the panels would then be screwed onto the architectural framework of the building to protect the glass. Finally, when all was done, the glass house would be lit up from the inside at sundown using timer-switched halogen lights, suspended at variable heights within the long, rectangular space. From the outside, the holes look as if they are emitting 'stars' of light, while the constellations are marked out in full view, day and night.

Primarily with this participatory 'hook' and process decided, and an aesthetically pleasing production in mind, we looked at options to fund and make it happen. Due to fortunate timing and previously-held connections, we initiated conversation with the then-forthcoming urban light-arts festival 'Valon Voimat', about our plans for a public light installation and workshop to be part of that year's programme [9]. This festival organisation (who actually owned the glass-house building in its early years) were sympathetic to our cause, as well as our method, and proposed result. They agreed to cover the material costs of making the installation, provide the lighting equipment needed, pay the electricity for the lights during the winter (in the end a limited period of 6 weeks), and negotiated with 'Helsingin Energia', the city's energy suppliers, to maintain electricity supply to the site all winter.

With 'Valon Voimat's financial backing and our volunteer energies, we made a call of interest to the local city art schools and environmental youth groups to get involved also, out of which 3 separate groups of teenage pupils (age 12-18 years), including 2 groups from Helsinki and 1 group from Vantaa [10]. We made at least one 'warm-up' visit to each group to discuss the themes of 'star-gazing', self-expression and representations in public urban space (including graffiti and sticker cultures). 'Taking care' and 'responsibility' were buzzwords we were including in our rhetoric. Following that, they came in groups of 12-15 people at once, accompanied by their teachers, during their scheduled afternoon-evening classes, with only a 2-hour period in total each visit (to arrive, make their design and get back home). Hence, we were seriously time-challenged, and had a hectic time when faced with the task of having a visiting group come to make their own designs. Even the teachers were making their own design too!

Furthermore, due to the cold and dark season of November, and even though we provided heaters and hot drinks or soup, it was difficult to maintain productive energy with the teenagers, never mind other passers-by who's time was less managed and even more voluntary. Hence, important to the success of participatory interaction, was making it easy to contribute a design. As organisers, not only did we have to be efficient with our and other people's time, maintaining an aesthetically-coherent result, we also had to micro-manage the individual contributions within certain parameters. In bold-type, we said as instructive rules: "USE MAXIMUM 8-10 STARS IN DESIGN. YOU CAN OF COURSE USE LESS THAN THIS NUMBER," and as part of the ideological aim to avoid isolated images, the "DESIGN HAS TO EXTEND BEYOND YOUR OWN BOARD INTO 1-2 ADJACENT NEIGHBOURING BOARDS" [11]. As part of the public Valon Voimat programme, we also held open-access workshops for passers-by over the weekend, so that anyone could make a design 'on the spot'. However, naturally, indeed heartfully so in the Finnish context, our rules were not fully adhered to, and were creatively broken or 'hacked', especially by the teenagers. As an example, friends who decided among themselves to collaborate together on a constellation, cleverly increased their limited star count to 20, thus making a more elaborate design possible. Then there was the exceptional case of the star constellation 'Kivi' (rock/stone), which was naturally self-contained on one panel by the youngest, (8-year-old) author. Indeed, even at the last, the '10-stars-maximum' was broken with an individual 15-star contribution! All were happily appreciated.

Once the arranged groups had come and made their design, and the open-access period over, Simo and I tarred the panels, installed them and set up the lighting-rig in a conventional public art installation manner for the deadline of the public opening 'lighting up' event. So, in the end, we were the artist-organisers, who invited a group of 45 people to get involved as well.

But who was the audience, and what role did they have? The whole workshop and installation was, of course, made in a public space. It was included in the programme and publicity of the Valon Voimat festival,

which that year centered around the Kallio district, and we received visitors in November/December because of this context.

Further, due to the physical location of the site on a popular park pathway in the centre of the city, parallel to the main railway lines, there was a reasonably frequent, passive, public audience, mostly unknown and unidentified. Occasionally that changed, and the audience became an active one, with people visiting the building while we worked, to ask what we were doing and why. Our offer of hot tea and coffee probably helped, too [12]. So, in total, the workshop-in-progress and installation-as-result had an audience of many passers-by, joggers and weekend strollers, not to mention all the potential observers from almost every train into the Central Railway Station.

In parallel, the project also existed online as a wiki-style website interface to our production process. This functioned in the early stages as an organisation tool between Simo, myself and the school groups in advance of the our activity. As we progressed, it also began to serve as an ad hoc diary and gathering of notes, where in 'artivistic' fashion, we tried to be transparent with the 'nuts and bolts' of the workshop, including showing a breakdown of our materials and finance budget for the project. We used the wiki pages also to document the placement of designs during the workshop sessions, and created a "star-chart" for the constellations that corresponded to the physical architecture of the building [13]. Unfortunately, the online presence lasted less time than the physical presence of the work: the wiki collapsed in January 2006, ironically due to the unstable open-source code of the software that we were using. It has been archived now as HTML in the state it last existed [14].

However, it is fair to say, for both the physical and online versions of the project, the audience was also ourselves. When construction was complete, we made a special opening event and invited all who were involved for hot drinks and storytelling about the different star-constellations. Although certainly no more than half of the participants were present, we did celebrate the occasion, and I am confident the project lived on in many people's winter lives and memories. For example, several participants mentioned the pleasure of seeing the installation, and their contribution to it, while in passing, doing other things, traveling home, going for walks, etc.

In total, due to the constant lighting for a period of 6 months, I can argue that the installation, despite its off-the-street location, was noticed, and raised awareness of 'Happihuone' in the winter-time to at least all of the participating people; and to an innumerable amount of other public locals even if the content and the reason why may have been slightly - or completely – ambiguous. The information sheet pinned to the building/notice board was not sufficient, and beyond the festival period in November/December, the project received no magazine or cultural newspaper publicity. On this issue, we, as organisers, failed to capitalise on the work's existence. It is a sad fact of the news world that more publicity was generated in

the local city/national paper, 'Helsingin Sanomat', with stories of a break-in and stolen artwork (August 2005) and the mass breaking of windows the following summer (August 2006) than with attempts to maintain, protect or save 'Happihuone' from being damaged or dismantled.

Concurrently, our ambitions to keep in touch with the participants of the workshop collectively to arrange a celebration at the end of winter, unfortunately, were not realized. The personal energy and stamina involved to do something based on volunteer energy was hard to conjure and sustain after, not only the intensity of the production process, but a long and late winter. Sadly, we-as-organisers, have not been in touch with the participants since December 2005, when I made follow-up visits to Helsinki City Art School, to show digital documentations to the people who couldn't attend the opening. Furthermore, my ambition to make another workshop, with the teenage art groups in the spring, based on planting seeds and gardening, went unsatisfied, too.

After 6 months of winter-weathering, and on the occasion the opening of the summer exhibition programme in June 2006, the wooden panels were removed solely by ourselves, the organisers. What began as an "individualistic collectivist" process of design by many, ended with a slightly depressing and deflating process of dismantling by only a few. No celebration, closing party, or re-gathering of authors. Embarrassingly, not even an E-mail was sent to the teachers, to pass on the message to the groups involved that it was going, going, gone. In this sense, as a social process, beyond the workshop, I felt like the project failed. But what is expected in such a situation? All was based on volunteer energies, and with feedback from those I have been better regular contact, the meaningful experience of taking part, was in the previous November, i.e. making the constellation designs. A similar feeling of 'dis-ease' occurred later in the summer (when the building resumed its status as a glass-house exhibition-space) when over 40 windows were broken in one night, due to vandalism. While out of the city, Simo and I had to agree for the wooden panels (with everyone's designs painted on them) to be taken out of storage, and re-installed in a different order as emergency coverage of the glass. The compromise solution was: To cover the broken windows with the designs turned inside-out, so they can be reused as part of new mural arts project. Another artist-group were then invited to paint over the back of the boards, with the design unseen on the inside. Naturally, the holes of the constellations could still be seen; this time in a more cryptic and new undefined arrangement. This incident, and our responsibility for finding solution to re-use the boards, highlighted the ethical responsibilities of managing the public display and storage of other people's content.

PART IV.

Motivation and experience stories, as given above, help to further inform understandings of individual interest, context and circumstances for an organising design. Upon reflection, this was a grassroots activist

campaign, supported by cultural festival money, based on volunteer energies, and the perceived pedagogical gain for students by the teachers, and ourselves as organisers.

However, I like to think that there was an underlying relational process of the workshop that was, if I am not too bold to call it this, 'transformagical': A scripted transformation of imagination, from one individual to a collective public to an other individual. A personally abstracted design was made from a subject meaningful to someone and installed in negotiation among others. Abstract and left open to interpretation, it is then free to be reconstituted as meaningful by the mostly anonymous passerby/audience, according to their own imagination.

Comparable to 'bare-bone stories' in the oral/folkloric public domain, these imaginary star constellations can be understood to fit within what Armin Medosch calls the "Open Source Culture" [15]. And let's say, for humour's sake, that when the view on the ground appears restrictive, there will always be the creative commons of the night sky, an expandable code, to be elaborated according to numerous individual understandings.

This text has presented the poetic spirit of a very material, localised and embodied labour, in relation to the discourse of the mediated, distributed and disembodied labour of people sharing their personal energies via media and interactions online. I believe that there are viable comparisons and complexities to consider between both the physical, 'hard-knock' world, and the electronic, intangible worlds. The wood panels in this story could instead have easily also been personal 'media-packet' contributions, to a collective online platform.

In conclusion, what I wish is that we all, as participants and organisers, are aware of the darker, more critical shapes that can easily form in parallel to our best, and most hopeful, designs. Look up to the sky for examples of open source culture. Select, abstract and reduce this image to its essence, its 'constellation-shape', so that one can share this perspective in code across different cultural skies with another one, and still others. As if to remind us of the benefit and challenges ahead - that everyone is likely to always see things in the stars differently - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince once said, "People have stars, but they aren't the same. For travelers, the stars are guides. For other people, they're nothing but tiny lights. And for still others, for scholars, they're problems. For my businessman, they were gold. But all those stars are silent stars. You, though, you'll have stars like nobody else" [16].

The following shared their imaginary star constellation in the workshop process:

West/dark-side: Alison Gerber+Jon Erikson; Paula-Kaisa Leppänen; Simo Haanpää; Satu Tuokkari+Marja Rassi; Juuli Autio; Linda Fredrikson; Nanna Ketola; Selma Lähteenmäki; Minna Pulkkanen+Valentin Abramenkov; Tanja Sihvonen; Jouni Kuitunen; Tommi Kokko; Taru Haarma; Severi Tikka; Mikko; Elina Miikki; Noora Pulkkanen; Ilkka M; Marianne Decoster-Taivakoski; Himmu Kurttila+Lotta Ulander; Andrew Paterson.

East/light-side: Alessa+Olga+Jeremy; Ilari Ilmonen; Sami Mattsson; Saara K; Anneli; Tuija M; Bo Telen+Antti Keinänen; Leo Lähteen; Joonas Moilanen; Maja+Reka; Reeta J; Petra S; Tuomas Ahonen; Elina Sänkiäho; Juha Rita; Lauri Laine; Johanna Rapinoja; Mikael Vuorijärvi; Sirkka Haanpää; John Evans.

Credits and thanks:

Co-producer Simo Haanpää; Happihuone project coordinator Papu Pirtola, and producer Sampsa Pirtola who coordinated events in summer 2006; Johanna Rapinoja and Tuija Mettinen, teachers at 'Helsingin Kuvataidekoulu' and Anna Hänninen, teacher at 'Vantaan kuvataidekoulu', who all allowed their normal class routine to be disrupted in their field-trip workshop sessions; 'Valon Voimat' director Isse Karsten and producer Esa Turtiainen; The friends who helped bear the burden of wood panels or last-minute screw-driving; To Sophie Sahlqvist for early star-constellation images; 'Koskisen Oy' for their cheaper-than-normal wood-panel price; 'o2 Finland Oy' for agreeing to host the project; All passers-by who stopped and chatted out of curiosity for what we were doing; And lastly, but not least, Alessa+Olga who kept reminding me over winter that they looked forward to seeing their butterfly constellation each day from the commuter train.

References

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- [11] Tähtikuvitelma workshop process notes:
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- [12] We had hoped to encourage some of the audience also to participate also in the process, by providing answers to curiosities and coffee with cake, but in the end unfortunately only 1 couple made a design who were completely unconnected to us in advance.
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